Language Teaching in Higher Education (A Dialogue)

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ABSTRACT

The diverse landscape of language teaching in UK higher education, encompassing various courses for a varied student population, faced significant impact from the COVID-19 pandemic. This dialogue aimed to capture an array of responses in this context. Colleagues from diverse institutions were consulted, representing multiple languages, programme types and teaching approaches. The respondents, who oversee language modules, highlighted the range of provisions, including undergraduate language degrees, institution-wide language programmes, short courses and Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) courses.

The focus was on broad questions to foster insightful discussions. While some divergence from the set questions occurred, these tangents revealed the concerns, priorities and aspirations of participants. The aftermath of the pandemic elicited varying viewpoints on assessment validity, student engagement, online teaching convenience and classroom dynamics. The responses were influenced by both personal and professional perspectives, as well as programme and institutional contexts.

A consensus did emerge that the COVID-19 pandemic, though pivotal, was not the sole driver of recent changes in language education. Despite the pandemic being over, the trajectory is clear – there is no going back, only forward.

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INTRODUCTION

Language teaching in UK higher education is very diverse by nature, encompassing courses and provisions of vastly varying sizes, purposes and contexts, designed for the benefit of an equally diverse "student" (in the broadest sense) population. The COVID-19 pandemic hit all in the sector equally strongly and suddenly, but the responses to it varied greatly according to each context and situation.

To try and get an insightful snapshot of this diversity of responses, I called upon several colleagues from around the country, in an effort to have as many languages, types of provisions and institutions represented as possible. The colleagues who kindly responded to my call all teach and oversee language teaching modules and programmes. They are Dr Marina Micke (University of Sheffield), Dr Catherine Xiang (London School of Economics), Cinzia Bacilieri (University of York) and David Tual (University of Cambridge), and they teach German, Mandarin Chinese, Italian and Korean, and French, respectively, though all of them are involved in the coordination and delivery of modules in other languages as well, such as Arabic, Japanese and Spanish.

The different types of HE language teaching provision include undergraduate language degrees (taken by students doing a degree specialising in languages and so-called "area studies"); institution-wide language programmes or "Languages for All" programmes (IWLP or LfAs, typically provision of language modules taken by undergraduates or postgraduates from various disciplines, either for credits or not, in some cases leading to degrees with minors in languages); short/open/commercial courses, open to all including staff and members of the local community; and Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) courses, typically one of the above, albeit tailored to a specific audience (e.g. engineers, medics, history of art students).

To structure the present conversation, I chose to focus on a few, relatively wide-ranging questions, in order to allow for everyone's answers to develop and move in whichever direction felt worth exploring. As the dialogue sometimes veers off from the set questions, we can see where everyone's concerns, priorities and hopes lie.

Without giving too much away, it is safe to say that not everyone agrees on everything when it comes to responses to, and the aftermath of, the COVID-19 pandemic. From the discussions on assessment validity, student rapport, classroom practice and the ubiquity and convenience of online delivery, it transpires that everyone's views are as shaped by their personal and professional outlook on language teaching as they are by the context of their programmes and institutions.

Where the conversation seems to come to a consensus is that the COVID-19 pandemic, although the main factor in shaping recent developments in HE language teaching, has by no means been the only factor, and while the pandemic is officially over, it is now clear to all that there is no going back – be it to normal or to anything else – only going forward.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to my colleagues who agreed to take part in this conversation, and I hope you will find it as enriching to read as it was for us to write!

QUESTIONS

1. In relation to language teaching in higher education, what positive/negative lessons has the pandemic taught us?

2. Has the use of digital tools been innovative/creative?

3. What has been the impact of the online pivot on teachers' digital literacy?

4. What changes have you noticed in the types of language learners that you are working with in a post-pandemic context?

5. What kind of impact has the pandemic had on language assessment practices?

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PANDEMIC

QUESTION 1: IN RELATION TO LANGUAGE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION, WHAT POSITIVE/NEGATIVE LESSONS HAS THE PANDEMIC TAUGHT US?

Catherine Xiang

I think the pandemic showed us how resilient, adaptable and flexible both teachers and students are. This is very encouraging. Despite the huge disruption, teaching and learning carried on. Everyone also learned new tools and developed a new approach to teaching and learning. The negative lesson could be the importance of ongoing staff development in the digital world. Some colleagues found it harder to adapt to online teaching due to a lack of experience and skills and ended up being very reactive to what happened.

David Tual

Like Catherine, I was struck by the resilience of colleagues at my institution and beyond. All my colleagues embraced the challenge presented by the lockdown and the sudden move online. Even the less tech-savvy teachers demonstrated a positive attitude towards having to master new tools in a short time. COVID served as a catalyst and left no option but to adapt if we were to maintain high standards in our teaching. I realise that we were probably lucky that all our staff had this positive attitude and the ability to adapt so well. It certainly showed that teaching online was *possible*, but that does not mean it is a sustainable solution that could become the default mode. We remained online for two years, and all colleagues were relieved to come back to face-to-face: the excitement of the early days had clearly given way to Zoom fatigue and the yearning for human contact with students and colleagues.

In the case of my centre, but also in many others I know of, the COVID era also served as a great team builder. In our case, we had weekly online meetings that were very well attended. For some colleagues, it was a way to break the isolation, for others, a forum to share tips or ask questions –– for most of us it was both. I remember reading about the Community of Inquiry model in the early days of lockdown and I was particularly interested by the notion of "social presence". Looking back, I feel that this dimension was also key for our team to perform well.

Cinzia Bacilieri

As for everyone else, we were hit by the pandemic and lockdown quite unprepared, and in York the whole teaching staff (core staff, graduate teaching assistants, i.e. postgraduate students with teaching duties, and tutors on fractional contracts) had to learn new skills in an extraordinarily short time. At my institution, we experienced the sudden switch to online format in two phases: the first phase in the very first lockdown, which was a race to adapt our teaching as asynchronous material delivered on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The second phase was the following academic year (September 2020–May 2021) when after only a couple of weeks of in-person classes (when both staff and students had to get used to teaching or learning while wearing a mask), we switched to a complete online delivery live on Zoom due to the second UK lockdown in the autumn of 2020. As mentioned by David, we spent the next two years between online and mixed delivery, suffering from Zoom fatigue. This, however, has demonstrated the adaptability of our teaching in formats never experienced before the pandemic.

Catherine Xiang

I think the success of transition very much depended on the existing digital skills of teachers as well as their mindset. As mentioned by David, being positive and open to trying out new tools became a key factor in determining students' learning experiences, but also the teaching experiences of all teachers. From a management perspective, it is important to be able to support both teachers as well as students during this challenging time.

Cinzia Bacilieri

Adding on to this, from a management perspective, a very difficult issue in the university-wide language provision sector is the fact that, in our LfA provision as in many other institutions nationwide, a number of teaching staff are often employed on a fractional contract basis to

deliver a course. The learning process required to apply new technologies to teaching and learning is extremely time-consuming, and this is not often fully recognised. This is particularly disadvantageous for fractional tutors who are hourly paid, who during the pandemic had to invest additional time in learning how to adapt and change their teaching methods. Probably this was the most negative impact we experienced from a managerial perspective.

David Tual

Very good point, Cinzia. As always, staff on fractional contracts (who sometimes hold several positions in different institutions) had to get familiar with different tools and procedures in different settings, and didn't necessarily have that training time paid for (we were lucky in our centre to be able to cover for 10 hours of training time for each member of staff, but I know this was more the exception than the rule).

Benoît Guilbaud

I find it interesting that, beyond the broad consensus that the pandemic was a challenging but formative time, there are some differences in the experiences reported by colleagues from different institutions. The points made by Cinzia and David on the (possible) disproportionate impact of the online pivot on fractional tutors rings unfortunately true to me. Catherine, Marina, would you echo this in your institutions? Furthermore, Catherine, you mention the "importance of ongoing staff development in the digital world" as well as the need to "support both teachers as well as students". Could you give concrete examples of challenges and what you would consider to be their causes?

I wholeheartedly agree with David's point that "teaching online was possible, but that does not mean it is a sustainable solution that could become the default", and I am personally weary of the place that hybrid delivery seems to be taking. For instance, meetings and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) sessions being recorded "for the benefit of those who cannot make it" is in my view an unsuitable replacement for the very "social presence" which David mentions. Here, convenience seems to find its limits and lead to less productive interactions. I wonder whether others agree with this.

The notion of "social presence" is one that we were very aware of at the University of Sussex, but admittedly we struggled to make it work – with interpersonal relationships among colleagues not yet back to pre-COVID levels.

Lastly, Cinzia, can I ask if you have views as to why your institution pivoted so last-minute to online teaching in the autumn of 2020 (you mention week 2)?

Marina Micke

As a whole, I would say that I can echo many of the observations made already as far as my institution is concerned. Striving for excellence in the use of language teaching technology lies at the core of our teaching ethos. The majority of staff and students were therefore familiar with and confident in the use of various digital teaching and learning tools, but the learning curve was still immensely steep. It is one thing to enhance teaching and learning with the help of digital tools; to teach and learn in an exclusively online setting is a completely different challenge. Activities seemed to take much longer and did not always have the same effect, the flow of the lesson was lost. All of this made us re-examine the timing of activities and the staging of entire lessons and it became clear to us that we had to radically rethink how we could achieve learning objectives in the online classroom. As a language centre, we settled on a flipped classroom approach where our learners would complete mandatory engagement tasks, both before and after a synchronous online class. This allowed us to focus on interactive and communicative core activities in the online classroom while allowing our learners to prepare and review less interactive material as and when they were able to. It was important to us that we also acknowledged the individual circumstances of our learners and provided the level of flexibility everyone needed to succeed at learning a language while navigating life during a pandemic. I am sure you will agree that this is an impressive feat that our learners have achieved!

Benoît, I would indeed agree that this challenge had the potential to be harder on fractional tutors as their work allocation often lacks the flexibility to allow for increased preparation and/ or CPD time. Both, I would argue, were essential for sustainably dealing with the change we

were experiencing in our professional lives. The University of Sheffield tried to address the additional need for preparation and CPD time very early on. As soon as it became clear that teaching would transition online for the foreseeable future, the Senate of the university, in agreement with Students' Union representatives, announced a change of semester dates. Effectively, this gave all teaching staff an additional non-teaching week over Easter, which allowed for a concentrated effort to review lessons and assessments in departments. This was further supported by an immense internal effort to upskill all staff and to supply working from home equipment where needed. When it was decided that the 2020/21 academic year would be delivered remotely, tutors on fractional contracts who were responsible for the planning and delivery of full modules were given the option to extend their contracts in order to have additional preparation time. All of this was thanks to a sympathetic understanding of the complex changes taking place at institutional and senior management level. That being said, it is also important to acknowledge that contract extensions and/or an increase in working hours are not a feasible solution for all staff, and I would definitely agree with Cinzia and David that fractional staff were under disproportionate stress.

Cinzia Bacilieri

Benoît, in the academic year 2020/21 the University of York wanted to push for only face-to-face classes across all the programmes, since this was deemed to be the preferred option by students. With regard to LfA, for students taking it as an extracurricular activity, the in-person social factor undoubtedly plays a vital role. This was proven by the fact that the LfA programme has been offering a dual delivery (one online class offered per level) since the pandemic, yet the online classes have hardly recruited, or not at all, while the face-to-face classes are still the biggest recruitment. However, as mentioned above, in 2020/21, after only 1–2 weeks of teaching (depending on the programme), we had to revert to full online teaching across all the programmes due to the spread of COVID just ahead of the second lockdown. This change was extremely difficult and abrupt, and it cascaded on to LfA staff with only a few days' notice.

INNOVATING WITH DIGITAL TOOLS

QUESTION 2: HAS THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS BEEN INNOVATIVE/CREATIVE?

Catherine Xiang

Zoom turned out to be really useful and helpful.

David Tual

In my centre, some of us had been using Zoom even before COVID for some telecollaborative projects, but that was the exception rather than the norm. Although some could argue that it doesn't constitute innovative practice as such any more, such schemes (alongside e-tandems and the like) definitely offered students and staff a precious window on to the outside world. There was a bit of confusion to start with as to which tool to use, since the university also introduced Teams just as we were entering lockdown, and we saw a plethora of digital tools popping up. Using these tools before COVID would definitely have been labelled "innovative", but when the lockdown started, we all had to get innovative and creative de facto. I guess that today one could say it has become mainstream. As a colleague of mine said in the early days of the lockdown, "it's like we have to learn to teach all over again", so maybe the creativity lies more in the pedagogy than in the technology…

Cinzia Bacilieri

At my institution, similar to David's, none of us had used Zoom before COVID and the experience of online teaching was the exception rather than the norm. Undoubtedly, the introduction of digital tools led to new planning, critical thinking and creative processes of class delivery as the teaching style had to adapt with the introduction of this new technology. As teachers we found we had to abandon our familiar classroom-based student–teacher interaction for an unfamiliar online class on Zoom, delivered on a screen: in an in-person class environment a tutor can walk around the room and "feel" the class and adapt the teaching accordingly, which cannot happen on Zoom (at least not in the same way). The first consequence we had to face

as a result was the depersonalisation of the lesson and class interaction, with many students not appearing on screen other than as a voice over a black screen (in certain cases this was due to slow internet connection, lack of equipment, but for the majority was a conscious decision of not wanting to appear to the class). This new and different teacher–student and student-to-student synergy was what prompted many of us to come up with different solutions in the teaching delivery and activities used before, during and after seminars with the aim of keeping student engagement similar to that of the usual in-person class.

Catherine Xiang

Zoom, in my experience, worked better than Microsoft Teams. The breakout room offers opportunities for pair work and group interaction. It is less convenient to conduct large group class activities. However, it seemed students were happy with the level of interaction provided by Zoom.

David Tual

Another thumbs-up for Zoom from most (if not all) staff in our centre. Of course, Teams went beyond in terms of being integrated into a package, but purely in terms of video-conferencing, Zoom quickly came up top for teaching. One issue still remaining though (regardless of the platform used) is surrounding netiquette (students not switching on their webcam, people logging in and out, "unprofessional" video background, interrupting, turn-taking, etc.).

Benoît Guilbaud

At Sussex, we also went through a period of uncertainty regarding which tool to use, while our institution was in the process of negotiating licence fees. In the end, Zoom prevailed for teaching and Teams for administrative communications. Staff took to it quite well overall. There were some interesting attempts at using technology to address new needs; for example, we used the platform Wonder to organise informal coffee mornings – again linking to the importance of the social connection between colleagues. However, this and other attempts did not always suffice, and some vulnerable colleagues reported feeling isolated during (and in some cases since) the pandemic. I wonder whether colleagues are also finding that the "return to normal" is far from complete?

I'm also interested in hearing about Cinzia's experience of students' cameras being turned off. In my institution, this has led to divisive debates among academics regarding the attitude to adopt. Although I've not personally encountered this situation, I think of it as quite problematic, whereas other colleagues have found it useful in helping students with anxiety. I wonder what David, Catherine and Marina think of this?

I'd also be interested in hearing more from Catherine about the use of online tools at LSE. Beyond Zoom, did anything stand out as particularly useful or innovative? And if not, why do you think that is the case?

Marina Micke

Unfortunately, I have nothing to contribute to the Zoom vs MS Teams discussion. The University of Sheffield had been supported by Google and its suites of web-based apps well before COVID. Staff and students have a Google account and access to its affiliated applications. As a language centre, we used these applications before the pandemic for collaborative work, sharing teaching materials and other administrative tasks, and I believe that many aspects of working remotely were less of an adjustment than they could have been. We had also used Google Docs for collaborative writing in class and as group homework along with other platforms such as Padlet, for example. Our teaching, however, was moved to our VLE's virtual classroom, Blackboard Collaborate, which only a few colleagues had used before. There was a clear learning need for all, but we were well supported.

Benoît, my colleagues and I also debated whether it should be mandatory for cameras to be on during online classes and ultimately the decision was made to keep it optional for many different reasons, anxiety being one of them. Personally, I did not see much point in asking students to turn their cameras on during teacher presentation phases. While I certainly missed

the quick visual feedback, I instead asked explicitly for feedback in the chat or through the use of emojis. Students were very responsive to this, and it was enough to gauge the temperature of the room, if you will, and to identify any issues. That being said, I did encourage my learners to use their cameras in breakout rooms during collaborative tasks and I was very pleased to see that most learners did use their cameras when working in groups. The more protected feeling of working in a small group may have helped, but I also believe that our learners were keen to see each other and connect with each other visually, which ties in with your earlier point of "break[ing] the isolation", David.

That true creativity and therefore innovation lies in our pedagogy and not in technology really resonated with me, David. We did recalibrate our pedagogy, moving towards a flipped classroom to preserve core activities for a communicative synchronous learning experience. Once that had become clear to us, the use of technology was not a question about why but how to use it. It would be very interesting to hear if there were any similar reviews of teaching practice taking place elsewhere?

Cinzia Bacilieri

As for many there was quite a debate among academics and departments with regard to the attitude to adopt, whether to make it mandatory for students to switch the camera on, in particular for seminars. Although pedagogically many wished to enforce this (to allow everyone to see one another as they would in a physical classroom, in the hope of prompting teacher–student or peer interactions), due to the diverse problems underlying the need to not have the camera on (one of which was poor internet connection) this was not followed through. Speaking from my own experience, I felt that, in a group, while there were at the beginning only a few "black screens", by the end of the course the number had definitely increased, causing students to be less motivated to appear. Conversely, in groups where from the outset all the students were able/happy to appear on screen, this continued until the very end of the course.

IMPACT ON TEACHERS' DIGITAL LITERACY

QUESTION 3: WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT OF THE ONLINE PIVOT ON TEACHERS' DIGITAL LITERACY?

Catherine Xiang

I would say very positive. Despite some of us not having time to be trained fully, colleagues learned and developed by doing.

David Tual

Most colleagues self-trained or took part in some dedicated training sessions offered by the university, but we also had some informal discussion and shared good practice during some of my centre's weekly online meetings. I think the impact was mainly to bring everyone to a basic level of mastery of tools such as Teams and Zoom, with some colleagues going the extra mile by exploring certain functions (whiteboards on Zoom for example) or other platforms (Padlet, Mentimeter).

Cinzia Bacilieri

As I see it, the first positive impact is a new upskilled teaching sector with the majority of the teaching profession having now become experienced – or in certain cases even proficient – users of a range of digital tools: most of us in York are now familiar with video production and digital editing, online uploading on YouTube channels and use of online platforms for teaching. This has created a much more flexible working environment post-pandemic, with meetings now held in dual delivery mode or the possibility of temporarily switching to online delivery in case of minor illness (or for different reasons). The second positive impact is an understanding of personal resilience and a newly acquired general mind frame: having experienced so many changes during the last few years, the general feeling in the teaching staff is the proud feeling that we have been able to continuously adapt our practice and in ways unheard of before the pandemic.

Benoît Guilbaud

I agree with colleagues that the pandemic has definitely set a new baseline for teachers' digital literacy: skills that were once considered desirable became an absolute necessity overnight. In some ways, however, the online pivot was also an eye-opener in terms of the *desirability* of online teaching. On a personal level, for instance, returning to in-person teaching after months of online teaching, I was shocked to realise – or remember – the amount of information and instant feedback I could communicate through body language alone – using arms, legs, sitting down, pointing, etc. The convenience and ubiquity of online interactions need to be balanced with the benefits of physical presence. I think colleagues may not always agree on where this balance lies precisely. This is not directly related to the question at hand, but I'm interested to hear what others think.

Cinzia Bacilieri

For the reason mentioned by Benoît, my preference is definitely to deliver a class in person instead of online. When teaching ab initio (beginners') language classes in particular, I found it undoubtedly more efficient to be able to provide immediate feedback, use body language and most importantly have the ability as a teacher to "read" the class and adapt my teaching accordingly. However, my bias towards face-to-face could also be due to the fact that pre-pandemic my experience with online teaching was almost non-existent, and all my professional experience had always been in a classroom: as a result, such an environment is familiar to me.

Marina Micke

It is very true that our sector as a whole has undergone a phase of massive upskilling. A good level of digital literacy as well as the ability and confidence to rethink our teaching in the light of online interactions was necessary, at least in my experience, to feel as though I have offered my classes a worthwhile learning experience. Now that we have returned to face-to-face teaching, I do sometimes find that these skills have got a bit rusty. I also miss some elements of the online classroom, especially the visual elements and ease of task-based learning that I struggle to recreate as smoothly in an analogue setting. I would have liked to see more opportunities for blended learning in order to maintain and expand the advanced digital literacy skills we have developed, and I can't deny a bittersweet feeling when thinking about this "double pivot".

WORKING WITH POST-PANDEMIC LEARNERS

QUESTION 4: WHAT CHANGES HAVE YOU NOTICED IN THE TYPES OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS THAT YOU ARE WORKING WITH IN A POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT?

Catherine Xiang

Students welcome online teaching and cherish more of the classroom setting. On the other hand, students, as well as teachers, hope to take full advantage of the technology whenever convenient for them.

David Tual

While most students were fine with our classes being online for two years, it seems that the general preference is for in-class teaching. It may be anecdotal, but one aspect that particularly struck me was that for the first time in six years, students asked for fewer telecollaborative sessions (taking place online with partners in France) and would prefer more traditional lessons (in class with their peers).

Cinzia Bacilieri

In contrast to Catherine's experience, the majority of our students are currently much more biased towards in-person learning and, if possible, tend to avoid online classes. This was confirmed by LfA enrolments in 2021/22 when we offered the dual delivery option with a possibility to enrol in online or in-person language groups. In the LfA Italian programme that I was coordinating at the time, only one online group in Level 1 recruited a handful of students, while all the others were so severely under-recruited that they did not run at all. Conversely, enrolment in the in-person

groups in the same levels were similar to pre-pandemic numbers or even higher. Of particular importance, our student cohort is a mix of credit students, university students taking the course on an extracurricular basis or staff/members of the local community. We have continued to offer in-person and online groups in the current academic year (2022/23) but the same thing happened in the last enrolment cycle. This is a clear indication that in York students consider the whole on-campus experience as a key contributing factor for enrolling in an LfA language class.

Benoît Guilbaud

Catherine, I'd be interested to hear what you would regard as "whenever convenient for them" in your point? Perhaps someone else wants to come in on this, but I think the question of "what/who/when is online teaching suitable" is key in a post-pandemic context.

Catherine Xiang

Sure. A student might prefer in-person teaching but would like to have the tutorial session online. Or they may also appreciate the flexibility of setting office hours online. Flexibility seems to be something everyone is asking for post-COVID.

Benoît Guilbaud

Thanks, Catherine. Cinzia, your point echoes our experience of enrolment on our short courses, where online and offline options were offered. The demand for online remains but is definitely smaller than the appetite for in-person teaching. Our language electives have returned fully in-person in 2022/23. Does anyone else have views on dual offerings (online + F2F) and how students have reacted to them?

Going back to the question above, I also wonder if anyone has any views on the "types of learners" we are working with post-pandemic. Beyond their possible preference for online or in-person, do you feel as though something has changed in your students? I would say, for example, that general levels of anxiety have kept rising – though this is not solely due to the pandemic – in some cases to critical levels (inability to take oral exams, etc.). In terms of students' use of technology in class, I haven't noticed a radical shift, but perhaps someone else has?

Catherine Xiang

Indeed, the shift from online learning back to in-person teaching has shown varying preferences among students. In our institution, we have also observed a stronger preference for face-to-face classes, but a certain proportion of students still appreciate the flexibility and convenience of online learning. Offering dual modes of learning (online + F2F) has been a valuable approach in catering to diverse student needs.

As for the "types of learners'" we are working with post-pandemic, I have noticed a few changes. First, the pandemic has likely intensified anxiety levels among students, as you've mentioned. The uncertainties and disruptions in their education may have contributed to this. Consequently, some students might be struggling to perform in high-pressure situations, such as oral exams.

Secondly, although the overall use of technology in class may not have drastically changed, students have become more accustomed to using online tools and platforms for learning. This has had both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, students are now more adaptable and can navigate virtual learning environments with greater ease. On the other hand, there is a risk of digital fatigue, and some students might struggle to balance the screen time required for learning with their personal lives.

Lastly, I believe students are now more aware of the value of social interaction and peer support in their learning journey. The pandemic has shown how important it is to maintain a sense of community and connection, even in a remote learning environment. In-person classes can further foster this sense of camaraderie, which is crucial for student engagement and overall well-being.

Overall, it is important for us as educators to be aware of these changes in our students and adapt our teaching practices accordingly. By offering dual modes of learning and being sensitive to the challenges our students face, we can help them thrive in the post-pandemic learning environment.

David Tual

Not much to add here, except that I think all students have now access to a portable device, for example laptop or tablet (and in the worst case scenario a smartphone, although it's not so user-friendly when a lot of text input is required), which in some exceptional circumstances was not the case a few years ago. The drawback of this being obviously that these devices can feel like a physical and psychological barrier between student and teacher if we're not careful, not to mention the distractions that might pop on to the students' screens (email in the best cases, social network notifications in others). Finally, unless you invite students to interact with each other while they wait for the class to start (by setting a routine warm-up task for example), they tend to revert to a "default mode" of staring at their phone in silence.

Cinzia Bacilieri

My experience in York echoes very much David's one above. Especially with regard to degree-level classes, although it depends on individual and personality, there is definitely a "default mode" of students staring at their phone in silence or relying on their laptop to find info, unknown words to say in the target language etc., which I did not experience before the pandemic. At the same time though, we have students who are much more able to engage with online activities, research and digital production (I often use videos as formative tasks to enhance students' speaking skills: students now have no technical issues or rarely even personal discomfort or anxiety in being recorded, when creating a video and expecting video feedback in return).

IMPACT ON ASSESSMENT

QUESTION 5: WHAT KIND OF IMPACT HAS THE PANDEMIC HAD ON LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES?

Catherine Xiang

At LSE, we are now exploring online written assessment. This has a huge impact on language learning, especially when it comes to Mandarin Chinese, which uses scripts. I believe the long-term trend is positive, and more time can be spent on developing students' written skills instead of Chinese character production skills.

David Tual

To me, this is the area where the impact has been the most significant. We got rid of written exams and replaced them with a portfolio (i.e., some form of continuous assessment) and an oral exam, each representing 50% of the final mark. With a few of my colleagues, we've implemented a reflective element to the portfolio, and we feel that this is the way forward as it promotes autonomy and more effective goal-setting on the students' part. It is something that we had started exploring pre-COVID, but the last three years have allowed us to give it more weight and we do not intend to go back to traditional written exams in the near future.

Cinzia Bacilieri

As in the case of LSE, at my institution for both undergraduate provision and LfA we have now a mix of online and in-person assessments, but the trend at the University of York is to move more and more towards online-only assessment in the near future. The main problem that we experienced with the online format was at lower levels, in particular with oral exam assessments (at York, with the aim of helping students without fast broadband connections, the latter were done as an asynchronous video and not live on Zoom). In my LSP (languages for specific purposes) module *Italian for Art Historians*, students found extremely rewarding the creative process of recording videos for their assessment: for this they were asked to describe paintings, and the majority created videos with the painting as a background and were able to point to different parts of the painting (similar to a weather presenter). However, from a teacher's perspective, I felt that students' attention was spread between video production and language delivery instead of focusing solely on the language as with the in-person exams. At the same time, it emerged from the oral production that many students went to research the paintings before recording their video; thus they also added a lot of additional details which led to language elaboration in their content that would be impossible to achieve with the other exam format.

Catherine Xiang

The pandemic has fast-tracked the format of online assessment from a logistical perspective. There is less paperwork. Typed out essays are more legible than handwritten ones. In my view, language assessment is facing bigger challenges due to technological advances, such as ChatGPT. The way we teach, assess and learn is constantly evolving. The pandemic certainly contributed to this evolution. I would argue that it is more helpful to consider ongoing adaptation and change to be the norm, instead of a one-off situation.

David Tual

I agree with Catherine that more challenges are coming our way and that we should welcome them and seize the opportunity to truly transform our assessment methods. For too long, we've been reacting to external factors by making adjustments to minimise their impact, but we need to be thinking forward a bit more and not just try to persevere in our old ways (by banning tools or reinstating written assessment under control conditions which do not reflect real life). Now is the time to get creative and have meaningful assessments, rather than going back to business as usual.

Benoît Guilbaud

Catherine, this is a key point for non-Latin script languages, which I'm sure all universities are encountering. I discussed this with my colleagues from Mandarin Chinese, Arabic and Japanese at Sussex, and the general feeling was that learning how to type was a key skill to acquire, and although script writing was practised in class, assessing it was not always a priority. What were the views of your colleagues (or students) on this matter? Did anyone else discuss this issue in their department? Perhaps Cinzia with Korean?

David, I would be interested to hear how quickly and how you were able to "get rid of exams". We have found this a rather arduous process at Sussex, both administratively and in terms of academic culture among colleagues.

I am also interested to hear everyone's thoughts on Cinzia's comment regarding asynchronous orals. At Sussex, during lockdown, we tried to limit asynchronous spoken production (i.e. pre-recorded) to a minimum, for example confining it to summer resit assignments. We felt that the "live" nature of orals needed to be preserved as much as possible. I wonder how other institutions view this issue?

I also agree with Catherine and David that there are much bigger challenges coming our way in terms of assessing written language skills. Arguably, machine translation posed those questions already even before the pandemic. I would argue that the pandemic was not the triggering factor but merely a catalyst in the inevitable evolution of our assessment practices. Unlike Catherine, perhaps, I'm not sure I think of online written assessment as more practical or convenient; rather I view assessing writing as decreasingly relevant, and think that perhaps, going forward, a reflective, portfolio-based approach is more sound and productive than assessing a final written product. What do others think?

Catherine Xiang

David, I wholeheartedly agree with your sentiment about transforming our assessment methods. As you've mentioned, we should not simply react to external factors, but actively look for opportunities to make meaningful changes in our assessment practices. Moving away from traditional methods and embracing creativity can help ensure that our assessments better reflect real-life situations and are more effective in measuring students' language abilities.

Benoît Guilbaud

In our department, colleagues teaching non-Latin script languages like Arabic, Mandarin Chinese and Japanese have also expressed similar views about typing being an essential skill. Our students seem to share this perspective, as they find typing to be a more practical and useful skill in today's digital world.

David, regarding the elimination of exams, I'm curious to learn about your experiences as well. At our institution, we've also encountered administrative and cultural hurdles when trying to implement changes to assessment methods.

On the topic of asynchronous orals, we have had a similar approach at our institution. We've attempted to preserve the live aspect of oral exams as much as possible, as it allows for a more authentic assessment of students' spontaneous language skills. It would be interesting to hear how other institutions have tackled this issue.

As for the assessment of written language skills, I concur that the pandemic has simply accelerated the changes that were already taking place due to the rise of machine translation and other technological advances. Assessing writing may become less relevant in the future, and adopting a more reflective, portfolio-based approach could be a more effective way to evaluate students' language abilities. This would enable students to showcase their growth and progress over time, rather than focusing solely on the final written product. I'd love to hear others' thoughts on this matter as well.

David Tual

So, to answer your question, Benoît and Catherine, we did exactly what Benoît described above, that is, we adopted a "reflective, portfolio-based approach". We already had a portfolio element in our assessment prior to COVID, but we brought its weighting up from 20% to 50% of the final grade and used an oral assessment for the remaining 50% (including a prepared "spoken production" and a "spoken interaction" as per the CEFR Framework). For the portfolio, several of us have adopted a focus on reflexivity, which is really rewarding in terms of the quality and range of outputs (students are encouraged to cover all skills, but also to tailor their work to their needs and interests) as well as insights into students' approach to language learning, to name only two of the benefits. In an era where written communication is mainly and increasingly computer-mediated, we feel the emphasis should rather be put on oral communication skills (in the broadest possible sense, i.e., not limited to language accuracy for instance), hence this choice (and therefore also echoing Catherine's words about authentic and spontaneous assessment).

Cinzia Bacilieri

Although my institution is definitely pushing for an online-only assessment format to be implemented in the future, I really welcome the opportunity to keep a mix of online and in-person assessments, depending on the course, so as to make the most meaningful changes in our assessment practices. For instance, in the case of languages with a different script, demonstrating an ability to type on a computer keyboard (which is what a language student has to learn to fully function in today's society) is per se something that should be included in an assessment, and this cannot be done on a piece of paper with a closed-exam format only. Also in the case of LSP courses, depending on the course content, there might be a need for research to make the assessment more meaningful, which can only be achieved through open online assessments (for instance in the case of *Italian for Art Historians*, to be able to make a comparison between different paintings to use as example in the composition – it is unrealistic to expect students to be able to memorise so many artworks, dates and locations). Assessment in other skills, such as speaking, presentations and so on, might be beneficial delivered via an in-person closed exam as the best option to really test students' proficiency.

Benoît Guilbaud

Thank you ever so much everyone for your contributions and insights in response to my questions!

USEFUL RESOURCES

EdPuzzle – https://edpuzzle.com/

Flipgrid – https://info.flip.com/en-us.html

Padlet – https://padlet.com/

Quizlet – https://quizlet.com/en-gb

Stanley, Graham. *Language Learning with Technology: Ideas for Integrating Technology in the Classroom*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Teaching English Online – Future Learn: https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/online-tutoring.

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